



## COMMENTARY SUBMITTED

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### **Invasive Plant Solutions are Complex**

Invasive plants are a tremendous threat to sustainability in Hawai'i. They reduce water supplies and water quality, negatively affect our ability to produce food, and promote the extinction of Hawai'i's natural and cultural heritage. Sadly, there are no easy answers for preventing new invasive plants from being imported into the state (SA 8/15/10). The short answer is that Hawai'i can make good, restrictive laws that can then be pre-empted by federal regulations covering foreign and inter-state commerce.

The more detailed explanation is that federal agencies are responsible for inspecting plants arriving from foreign ports. The plants they are looking for must be on their federal Noxious Weeds List, which consists of about 160 plants that pose a threat to the greater U.S. The state Department of Agriculture is responsible for inspecting plants arriving from domestic ports. The invasive plants they are looking for are on the state Restricted Plants and Seeds lists, which consist of about 80 invasive plants. Neither the federal nor the state lists are adequate primarily because there are approximately 300,000 species of plants in the world, and science estimates that of these, 10% will naturalize and spread on their own if imported and grown in Hawai'i, and, of these, 10% will become invasive.

Around the world, governments are adopting a Weed Risk Assessment screening system, a system that employs plant specialists that use published information to answer 49 questions about the plant's biology and invasive history elsewhere. The system can accurately predict the invasive potential of a plant before it is imported and planted, and the federal Department of Agriculture is drafting new rules that would require all new plants imported into the U.S. be screened to help identify and restrict the entry of potentially harmful invasive plants. Although this is a good idea, one problem is that some plants may not pose a threat to temperate continental systems, yet may be hugely invasive in Hawai'i's climate and systems.

There are significant legal challenges that prevent the Hawai'i Department of Agriculture from requiring a Weed Risk Assessment screening of plants arriving from foreign and domestic ports. Specifically, the federal Plant Protection Act states that the Secretary of Agriculture has the ultimate authority over the movement of plant species in interstate and foreign commerce, which preempts the Hawaii Department of Agriculture from being as restrictive as it might like to be on arrivals of plants from foreign and domestic locations.

These substantial legal issues need to be resolved at the congressional level, with a policy from the Federal government that recognizes and affords special biosecurity protection for Hawai'i as a gateway to the continental U.S.

In the meantime, Hawai‘i has a Weed Risk Assessment screening system already available as a free, non-regulatory service, funded by the Hawai‘i Invasive Species Council. To date, over 1,000 species of plants have been assessed for the invasive potential, and these results are provided so that plant industry, agencies and the gardening public can make good, informed planting decisions. Visit [www.botany.hawaii.edu/faculty/daehler/wra/](http://www.botany.hawaii.edu/faculty/daehler/wra/) for more information, or to submit a plant name for screening.

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